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SUBJECT: SECURITY THREATS TO HUMANITARIAN AID AGENCIES:
UNRWA

REF: STATE 345694 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Ambassador Gnehm per 1.5 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Per reftel, refcoord reviewed UNRWA security issues with Deputy ComGen AbuZayd on January 14. According to AbuZayd, the majority of security threats to UNRWA stem from IDF-Palestinian fighting in the West Bank and Gaza. UNRWA workers also face harassment and verbal threats from some private Israeli citizens. AbuZayd believes that UNRWA's role as the primary source of support for Palestinian refugees provides protection from Palestinian militants. Recent attacks on the UN in Iraq and Afghanistan have prompted UNRWA to tighten security for its operations in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, where UNRWA has remained at security phase I in spite of ongoing Israeli-Palestinian violence. UNRWA is particularly concerned about security for its Jordan operations, due to an Iraq-related increased in the UN presence here and related potential new threats. While UNRWA's unique mandate to provide services to Palestinian refugees may create a sense of false security against terrorism, recent attacks on other presumably "safe" areas such as Arab expatriate neighborhoods in Riyadh demonstrate that terrorists do not necessarily follow logic. Increased security for UNRWA installations, especially in Jordan, strikes us as prudent. End summary and comment.

¶2. (C) As requested reftel, refcoord met with UNRWA Deputy Commissioner General Karen AbuZayd on January 4 to discuss the agency's security concerns in the wake of increasing attacks on humanitarian workers throughout the world. Cautioning that UNRWA operates in a unique environment, AbuZayd said that UNRWA's security concerns are well-known to the U.S. Government and focus largely on IDF actions undertaken in the West Bank and Gaza. While attacks on the UN and other humanitarian agencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have prompted UNRWA to take a closer look at the security of its installations outside the West Bank and Gaza, its core concerns -- regarding the safety of its international and Palestinian staff in the midst of a conflict -- remain unchanged.

THREATS DURING THE LAST TWO YEARS

¶3. (C) AbuZayd told refcoord that the vast majority of security threats to UNRWA workers has resulted from IDF-Palestinian fighting in the West Bank and Gaza. Since the current conflict began in September 2000, two on-duty UNRWA staff have been killed by IDF troops and another six off-duty UNRWA employees were killed when they were caught near clashes between the IDF and Palestinian militants. (AbuZayd noted that the IDF still has not shared with the UN its investigation into the November 2002 death of UNRWA international staff member Iain Hook, whom the IDF acknowledges it shot to death during a raid in Jenin refugee camp.) Beyond the usual risks of operating in a conflict zone (e.g., being in the wrong place at the wrong time), AbuZayd said that UNRWA's 13,000 employees in the West Bank and Gaza face the added risk of navigating IDF checkpoints on their way to and from work and, in some cases, in the performance of their duties. These UN employees face daily harassment and abuse from the IDF and several have reported that the IDF has pointed guns at their heads. In Gaza (site of UNRWA's administrative and policy headquarters), she said UNRWA employees face still more risks from targeted assassinations in densely crowded civilian areas. On the evening of December 30, for example, UNRWA Comptroller Ramadan Al-Omari narrowly escaped injury when an IDF missile struck a civilian vehicle that was only two cars ahead of him.

¶4. (C) Separately, UNRWA employees face threats and harassment from private Israeli citizens. UNRWA Commissioner General Peter Hansen has received numerous threatening phone calls, including death threats, from callers who appear to be Israeli. As a result of these calls, Hansen now travels with a full-time bodyguard/driver and makes a point of varying his times and routes. UNRWA international staff also face harassment and petty vandalism from Israelis, with UN cars frequently defaced and spat upon, and UN employees in those cars accosted with shouts of "unwanted" or "UN is nothing." Several West Bank-based international employees have told

refcoord they prefer not to travel inside Green Line Israel in order to avoid such harassment. Similarly, AbuZayd told refcoord that she has chosen not to have "UN" emblazoned on her car in order to avoid personal harassment and negative attention for the Israeli friends whom she visits on weekends.

15. (C) When pressed by refcoord to identify possible threats emanating from the Palestinian community, AbuZayd responded that the general Palestinian perception of UNRWA as a source of protection and relief for Palestinians ensures that even militant, rejectionist factions respect UNRWA and its staff. UNRWA, she noted, is often viewed in the Palestinian community as something apart from the rest of the UN system, an organization that is part of the community and dedicated to the well-being of Palestinian refugees. As such, UNRWA is not even referred to in Palestinian communities as "the UN;" it is instead called either "the agency" or "the agency for relief." When Palestinians complain about UNRWA, it is usually a request for more services or a job. Even in the lawless and desperate atmosphere of Lebanon's refugee camps, where UNRWA employees are routinely criticized for perceived slights to one faction or another, the tense political environment has never resulted in assaults on UNRWA employees. While AbuZayd noted that UNRWA could not afford to discount the risks of individuals acting against UNRWA, she said that recent attacks on the UN in Iraq and Afghanistan have not changed UNRWA leaders' assessment that the Palestinians perceive UNRWA to be a benevolent organization that must be protected.

16. (C) Given the assessment that security risks to UNRWA stem largely from the current conflict in the West Bank and Gaza, AbuZayd said that UNRWA's security situation depends on resolution of the overall political situation. Her personal view, and that of other senior UNRWA managers, is that the political situation -- and hence UNRWA's security situation -- is unlikely to improve anytime soon. The greatest contribution the U.S. could make to the security of UNRWA workers, AbuZayd said, would be an enhanced effort toward peace.

EFFECT OF ATTACKS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

17. (C) AbuZayd told refcoord that recent terrorist attacks on humanitarian agencies in Iraq and Afghanistan have had the greatest impact on UNRWA operations in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, where the UN family has largely remained at security phase I in spite of conflict elsewhere in the region. (UNRWA operations in the West Bank and Gaza have been at phase III during the same period.) AbuZayd acknowledged that because UNRWA operations in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon have not been affected by the ongoing violence in the West Bank and Gaza, UNRWA's security rules and procedures in those countries prior to the August 19 UN bombing had been relatively lax. In Jordan in particular, AbuZayd said, UNRWA -- like other UN agencies -- is now worried that the larger UN footprint created by the high numbers of UN staff "in exile" from Iraq makes international agencies in Jordan a more inviting target for terrorists. (Heads of several UN missions in Jordan have also raised these concerns with us.) She added that UNRWA's Jordan field office is particularly vulnerable, as -- unlike other UNRWA offices -- it is located directly on a public street and has no setback. (All other UNRWA offices, including the Gaza and Amman headquarters, are located in large compounds with restricted access and considerable setback from public streets.)

18. (C) In the wake of the August 19 attack on the UN in Baghdad, UNRWA management in all five fields has changed its "security mentality" and procedures in accordance with recommendations contained in the UNSYG's independent review of the Iraq attack. All UNRWA international staff have undergone mandatory security training and senior management is convening more regular meetings of the fields' security management teams (SMT). AbuZayd said SMTs in the West Bank and Gaza meet on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, while SMTs in the other fields now meet once a month. However, the number of UNSECOORD staff members has not changed. One UNSECOORD official is responsible for all UN agencies in the West Bank and Gaza and another UNSECOORD official is responsible for all UN agencies in Jordan. AbuZayd was not aware of UNSECOORD arrangements for operations in Syria and Lebanon. She noted that further changes will depend on the next round of UN recommendations on required security changes (due to be completed in mid-January), as well as the willingness of donors to fund these changes.

COMMENT

11. (C) Due to the nature of its mandate -- providing relief and services to just one party in a long-running and

emotionally charged conflict -- UNRWA inevitably is viewed by both Israelis and Palestinians alike as anything but a neutral organization. This perception historically has provided UNRWA a great deal of protection from Palestinian militants, while raising Israeli government suspicions about UNRWA's true activities and intent. The fact that the vast majority of UNRWA's 23,000 employees throughout the region are themselves Palestinian refugees only reinforces these views. For these reasons, we judge it unlikely -- but not impossible -- that terrorist groups would choose to target an organization that works exclusively on behalf of one of the primary groups of dispossessed whom terrorists claim to support. Nevertheless, recent attacks on the UN in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as on mostly Arab residential neighborhoods in Saudi Arabia, demonstrate that terrorists do not necessarily follow such logic and that UNRWA cannot be complacent about potential new threats. Increased security measures for UNRWA's estimated 800 facilities throughout the region -- and particularly here in Jordan, where the incentive seems greatest for an attack on the UN -- seem to be prudent.

GNEHM